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## Exercises in Puerto Rican Self-Determination: The Humboldt Park Participatory Democracy Project

### Cover Page Footnote

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# EXERCISES IN PUERTO RICAN SELF-DETERMINATION:

## The Humboldt Park Participatory Democracy Project

Michael Rodríguez Muñiz

Chicago, Illinois

Photo provided by Michael Rodríguez Muñiz. Courtesy of Batey Urbano Archives.



**W**ho should determine the future of a community?<sup>1</sup> In our complex world, this seemingly simple question is rarely posed, and even more rarely answered.

However rare, I believe that the overwhelming consensus, and the only ethical response, would be that a community should determine its future. But like all systems of oppression, the forces of colonialism and its urban overseer, gentrification—continue to contradict our ethical sensibilities.

### GENTRIFICATION AND THE PUERTO RICAN COMMUNITY

In Chicago's Humboldt Park/ West Town area, gentrification is threatening the future of the Puerto Rican community. Gentrification, a process of spatial de-concentration, destroys inner city communities (often of color) through various methods. Without so much as a vote or an opinion poll, developers and speculators are attempting to determine what is to become of Humboldt Park. Obsessed with the construction of luxurious condominiums, displacement is no becoming a real fear of the long-time residents of area. As property taxes rise, so do rent costs, resulting in more and more families being economically forced out, against their will. Still more, gentrification does not end with displacement; it continues with the confiscation and subsequent obliteration of a community's legacy.

The recent and repeated attempts to obstruct the oldest Puerto Rican mural in Chicago with a condominium, teaches us how this process destroys community symbols, public art, and popular culture. This lesson is driven home further with the example of Lincoln Park, which was once a vital Puerto Rican community but today has lost all vestiges of this history. Ask anyone in Lincoln Park today about this history and you will realize how gentrification erases history.

For over 40 years, Humboldt Park has been synonymous with Puerto Ricans. Here, like no other place in Chicago, this area has been the focal point of Puerto Rican activity, culturally, politically, and economically. In a sense, this area is akin to Boston's Villa Victoria and New York City's Spanish Harlem. Being one of the largest Puerto Rican communities outside of New York City, Humboldt Park has had a long Puerto Rican history, including the yearly celebration of the Fiestas Patronales and Puerto Rican People's Parade, which grew out of the 1966 and 1979 Division Street "riots" (rebellions). The most recent of these historic developments has been the establishment of Paseo Boricua and the movement to build a stable, viable, and autonomous Puerto Rican community.

"Paseo Boricua," the term that affectionately refers to Division Street between Western Avenue and Mozart Avenue, is marked by the two towering Puerto Rican flags erected in 1995. Vigilantly cognizant of the movement of gentrifying forces



displacing Puerto Ricans from Wicker Park and most of West Town, community organizers established Paseo Boricua to be the anchor of the Puerto Rican community. According to Nilda Flores-Gonzalez “Paseo Boricua rises from the determination not be displaced and is firmly rooted in a solid vision.”<sup>2</sup> In Humboldt Park, Paseo Boricua is one project of a larger, holistic community strategy, albeit a very important component.

Along with the transformation of Division Street into a cultural-economic corridor, community efforts have resulted in the organization of a community-wide revitalization plan known as the Humboldt Park Empowerment Partnership (HPEP), as well as the formation of the Puerto Rican Agenda. In particular, the Puerto Rican Agenda, an ad-hoc committee made up of professionals, students, community activists, and local politicians, has worked tirelessly over a decade to help maintain and stabilize the Puerto Rican community.

Together, these organized bodies have developed numerous strategies; for example, several new programs seek to increase home ownership and affordable housing, while other programs address health and employment needs. This reclamation of space, both geographical and cultural, is all the more impressive when understood within the socio-economic context of this Puerto Rican community.

As an internally colonized people, the Puerto Rican community suffers from astronomical dropout rates, high levels of drug and alcohol abuse, rampant gang violence, poverty and unemployment. Though the challenge is great, community efforts have made substantial inroads in addressing these needs and strengthening its economic infrastructure. Lamentably, however, gentrification is a persistent foe.

Armed to the teeth with outside financial and political force, gentrification has begun to displace many Humboldt Park residents. In actuality, Puerto Ricans, once the majority group, have suffered over the course of the last decade a significant population decline.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, as history has proven, Puerto Ricans are determined to remain in Humboldt Park.

## PARTICIPATORY DEMOCRACY EMERGES IN HUMBOLDT PARK

A new initiative of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center (PRCC), a long time beacon of resistance, is focused on further engaging residents by posing the following question: who is to determine our fate in el barrio? The PRCC, espousing the concept of participatory democracy, believes that this question can only be answered and fulfilled by the collective participation of the



Photo provided by Michael Rodriguez Muñiz. Courtesy of Batey Urbano Archives.

community. Without increased participation in community development—gentrification cannot be stopped.

The PRCC, in collaboration with various community organizations such as the Near Northwest Neighborhood Network (NNNN), the Division Street Business Development Association (DSBDA), and counting on the support of Alderman Billy Ocasio and the Puerto Rican Agenda, seeks to transform its grassroots precinct operation into a galvanizing force for community participation. It is seven precincts, located in the 26th Ward, which will serve as the base for the participatory democracy project.

In January 2004, the Humboldt Park Participatory Democracy Project was launched with a 10-week pilot program and 35 participants from Northeastern Illinois University, University of Illinois at Chicago, Columbia College, University of Chicago, and youth from the Family Learning Center and other surrounding high schools, in addition to several community activists. This young cohort took part in a series of workshops, skill-building exercises, and door-to-door visits. Workshops included among other topics, discussing existing community resources, learning about the levels of government, and how to facilitate resident participation. The door-to-door visits have several goals: 1) to assess and address community needs by linking residents to existing community service providers; 2) to build relationships with residents in order to dialogue about community life; and 3) to foster and nurture spaces for community members to participate in community development.

Since those early months, the project has served as an impetus for the launching a campaign calling on displaced Puerto Ricans to “Return to El Barrio,” as well as the organization of a grassroots Puerto Rican newspaper. *La Voz del Paseo Boricua*’s 10,000 monthly copies circulate throughout Chicago’s dispersed Puerto Rican community carrying a message of urgency and possibility. In the Fall 2004, the Participatory Democracy Project entered its next phase of work, this time with its ranks filled largely with barrio youth from the Puerto Rican Cultural Center’s Batey Urbano and the Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos Alternative High School.

In tangible terms, the project has registered hundreds of residents to vote, collected dozens of city “service requests” weekly, served as the liaison between residents and community organizations, resulting, for example, in youth returning to high school and families given the opportunity to remain in the community. The visibility of involved organizations has increased, as has resident participation in community events and programs. Despite these successes, the Project is still relatively in its infancy and in a process of continue growth and reevaluation. Organizers are aware that the project will not yield immediate results; instead its full impact lies in the slow, ongoing transformation of a community.

When asked to define participatory democracy, one participant responded, “The term ‘participatory democracy’ seems to be redundant, since the word democracy in essence is about participation.” But this is not what the larger society seems to consider “democracy.” In theory and practice, these Humboldt Park organizers demand distinction and a redefinition of democracy. To this end workshops argued that Participatory Democracy could not be confused with “representative democracy.” Within these debates over ideas and action is where the project’s broader vision emerges. Let us indulge in the distinctions between participatory and representative democracy.

Representative democracy, particularly the United States model, is (largely) equivalent to electoral politics, by where participation is merely punching a hole through a ballot. Thus, reducing the role of a person from a participant to a pandered



voter. Voting, in turn, becomes an individual's primary method by which to influence government, in true liberal fashion. By this singular act, people delegate their political power to a representative, and therefore compromise their opportunity/responsibility to effect change, both individually and more importantly, collectively.

Ever increasingly, critical political theorists have questioned democracy as solely electoral politics. Critiquing "thin democracy," Benjamin Barber writes, "Representation is incompatible with freedom...Men and women who are not directly responsible through common deliberation, common decision, and common action for the policies, that determine their common lives are not really free at all."<sup>4</sup> In other words, people must be directly involved in giving shape to the processes that govern the character and quality of their lives.

The Puerto Rican experience further critiques U.S. representative democracy due to charges of colonialism and racism. For over 100 years, Puerto Rico has been a colony of the United States, entirely under the subjugation of the United States Congress. The island, as the Supreme Court ruled in 1922, "belongs to, but is not a part of" the United States.<sup>5</sup> In fact, it is U.S. colonial rule (which by the way is innately anti-democratic), which industrialized the island and caused the massive airborne migration of Puerto Ricans to the United States, migration that created communities now threatened by gentrification.

Upon arriving to cities like Chicago and New York, Puerto Ricans faced blatant and often times violent racism; and up until the early 1970's, for example, were not even fully enfranchised due to language requirements. With all of representative democracy's obvious, and some would argue intentional limitations, Puerto Ricans, like other historically oppressed peoples (i.e. Native Americans, Blacks, and Mexicans), have been denied full and meaningful political participation rendering self-determination a dream. Still worse, there are many examples of how "democracy" has been used against oppressed people, often as tools of pacification and dependency. Not only has genuine democracy been denied but the rhetoric of democracy has been used as a mechanism to perpetuate inequality and injustice. It is no surprise that this democracy of the elite is insufficient and unable to address issues of community autonomy, decolonization, and self-determination.

In the site of persistent colonial dilemmas, expanded, localized formulations of direct democracy enable creative responses to socio-political problems. *Participatory Democracy*, therefore, is precisely about people taking responsibility for their lives and communities. Central to this notion, at least in its most radical conceptualizations, are the *liberatory* properties of participation. Active community participation *authorizes* people—as individuals within a collective—to confront every problem with an unshakable resolve. It is through this ongoing praxis of action and reflection that the chains of imposed dependency and learned helplessness are broken. Through resistance, the barriers of marginalization and alienation are constructively torn down so that freedom can be born. Discussing the "pedagogy of freedom," the late radical Brazilian educator Paulo Freire wrote, "freedom will gradually occupy those spaces previously inhabited by dependency."<sup>6</sup> Through this humanizing process, "spectators" will become "privileged actors" in the ground-up and grassroots construction of an autonomous and self-sufficient community.<sup>7</sup> No longer are solutions to be found outside of the community; instead, they are created and acquired through the hard, day-to-day work of struggling for change.

In a profound refutation of the traditional deficit model of

development used on communities of color, Humboldt Park's efforts have been sustained by building on existing community *assets*. Invigorated through the masterful harnessing of *social capital*, the struggle against gentrification has led to a proliferation of interconnected projects responsible for the community's holistic vision. Social capital, which can be defined as the transformation of disparate human and financial capital into collective assets, allows for a multiplicity of persons to participate in community work. Though still economically depressed, many historical accomplishments have been achieved in Humboldt Park through the amalgamation of community assets found in the business, cultural, social service, electoral politics sectors, as well as in the community's parallel institutions.

Parallel institutions, or in other words alternative community institutions, are the foundation of the Humboldt Park Participatory Democracy Project.<sup>8</sup> These grassroots organizations serve a community in at least two major ways. First, parallel institutions, for example, like Dr. Pedro Albizu Campos Alternative High School provide services and resources, in this case to underserved Puerto Rican youth, that the government and mainstream service organizations have systematically denied the community. They are institutional manifestations of a community taking care of its own needs. Secondly, these institutions are centers of political and cultural engagement, providing a site for the experimentation of progressive initiatives and models.<sup>9</sup> Remarking on grassroots indigenous and campesino community organizing in Central America during the war-torn 1980's, Minor Sinclair writes, "Alternatives can be proposed and experimented with at the local level." He goes on to write, "At the local level popular organizations are most able to build a democratic revolution from below where people can participate in local decisions." The Puerto Rican community in Humboldt Park over the last 30 years of struggle has developed several parallel institutions which address health, education, human rights, youth, and childcare needs.



Photo provided by Michael Rodriguez Muñiz. Courtesy of Batey Urbano Archives.

Participatory democracy, though much stronger and more deeply rooted than representative democracy, does not altogether rule out voting. Understanding its limitations, voting and elections are considered spaces to be transformed to the extent possible into vehicles for change. Under this purview, voting is just one component in an overall effort to build an autonomous community. In Humboldt Park this struggle counts on the relationship between the community and its elected officials, including Congressman Luis Gutierrez, State Senator Miguel Del





Photo provided by Michael Rodríguez Muñiz. Courtesy of Batey Urbano Archives.

Valle, Commissioner Roberto Maldonado, State Representative Cynthia Soto, and Alderman Billy Ocasio. The participatory nature of this relationship ensures that elected leadership is responsive to grassroots community work, and that political power is enjoined effectively at both ends. The Participatory Democracy project is working to complement the work of the elected officials, by launching regular voter registration campaigns and aiming to increase voter turnout in the upcoming elections. The idea here is simple; create an electoral “power base” to ensure that the concerns and needs of the community are respected and addressed within official governing bodies, to the extent possible.

## GLOBAL RESPONSES

None withstanding, this democratic initiative is not only indicative of local and national circumstances, but also of the hegemonic quagmire known as neoliberal globalization. Communities around the planet, regardless of rural or urban settings, are being adversely affected by the neoliberal project. The thorough economic restructuring of the city, widespread de-industrialization, rapid dismantling of the “welfare state,” and above all the exaltation of transnational corporations and banking centers, has placed already marginalized communities in a more precarious position.<sup>10</sup> In response, communities have undertaken imaginative steps, laying the groundwork for tomorrow’s societies. But these creative responses are not necessarily new; chances are they are modifications of past struggles more properly situated in the present day. “What appears here is not a new rationality but a new scenario of different rational acts— a horizon of activities, resistances, wills and desires that refuse the hegemonic order, propose lines of flight, and forge alternative constitutive itineraries.”<sup>11</sup>

Drawing many parallels from the Zapatista experience in Chiapas, Mexico, and over 30 years of radical Puerto Rican struggle, this project is as much a reflection of a global phenomena based on localized resistance, as it is the result of the struggle for Puerto Rican self-determination. Gentrification, as an ever present backdrop, reminds community organizers of the impact of neoliberal globalization domestically, as well as heightens the sense of community necessary to combat it— most pertinently through resistance built upon participation, cultural affirmation and parallel institution building.

As Rachel Rinaldo noted, in her analysis of the Puerto Rican Cultural Center and Puerto Ricans in Humboldt Park, “For a colonized, marginalized group to express such collective identity, to assert its right so self-definition through cultural representation, through physical space, is certainly a form of resistance to colonial domination.”<sup>12</sup> Participatory Democracy is another example in this community of space transformed into a instrument for socio-political change.

Out of urban decay, imposed poverty, under funded schools, internalized self-hate, and paralyzing hopelessness – quite the colonial reality – a community is laying the foundation for its own recovery. Through meaningful participation, the chance to create a just future is etched out slowly, day-by-day and via the collective articulation of solutions and responses of the entire community rather than by the forces of gentrification. They know the “grandiose glare of history’s floodlights” is upon them; and that is why these Puerto Ricans exercise in self-determination.<sup>13</sup>

## NOTES

1. The following words are the result of numerous ongoing discussions at the Juan Antonio Puerto Rican Cultural, Chicago.
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3. Puerto Rican Agenda. Economic and Housing Development Committee Concept Paper. 2003.
4. Barber, Benjamin. 1984. *Strong Democracy*. University of California Press: Berkeley
5. Duffy, Christina. 2001. *Foreign in a Domestic Sense*. Duke University Press: Durham/London
6. Freire, Paulo. 1997. *Pedagogy of Freedom*.
7. Fanon, Frantz. 1963. *Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press: New York
8. Interview with Roberto Flores and Greg Tanaka by Peter McLaren, “Autonomy and Participatory Democracy: An Ongoing Discussion on the Application of Zapatista Autonomy in the United States. Link: [www.inmotionmagazine.com/auto/ijer.html](http://www.inmotionmagazine.com/auto/ijer.html)
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11. Hardt, Michael and Negri, Antonio. 2000. *Empire*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge
12. Rinaldo, Rachel. 2001 “Space of Resistance.”
13. Fanon, Frantz. 1963. *Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press: New York

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